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# Something Elemental

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**Something Elemental**

**by**

**Samantha J. Bell**

**A thesis submitted to the Department of English of the State University of New York**

**College at Brockport, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of**


**Masters of Arts**

**May 10, 2004**

Something Elemental

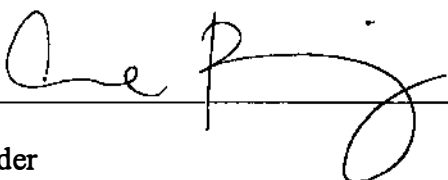
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Advisor

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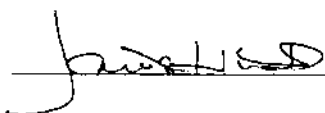
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To those who believe in me  
as I believe in them.

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*Poems must, of course, be written in emotional freedom. Moreover, poems are not language but the content of language.*

*Mary Oliver, from A Poetry Handbook*

When I started writing poetry, it was in my bedroom and I was terrified of anyone reading it. As I evolved as a writer, and as a poet, I have found myself shoving my new drafts into the palms of my friends, my mother, and professors. I wanted the world to know, and I wanted the world to know because I felt that I *knew*. I knew what it felt like to feel the emotions that would eventually drive much of my poetry. I would know the feeling of a final draft of a poem absolutely saying what I struggled in a social world to say with conversational language. What the poem did for me, initially, when I began it as a craft, a discipline, and not merely as a hobby, was become the content of the language I was trying to utilize. Poetry, to me, is the utilization of my language to express emotions, drive meaning and make the connections that we see naturally occurring each day as we continue to live. The craft of poetry has always been one of discipline and exercise, something to be taken, molded, formed, and reformed through imagery, metaphor, narrative and an emotional passion for and response to life. Poetry has become for me not an outlet, or a cathartic experience, but a very tenuous balance of holding language in my hands and structuring each word, line, and breath, to fit into that beautiful scope of a singular poem.

“Something Elemental” is a collection of my poems, some of them spanning more than six years, some of them absolutely experimental, and some of the poems are also new, fresh, rolling still inside my head. I have chosen the title. “Something

Elemental,” because the focus of this project is to weave all these poems into a somewhat unified theme: what it means to be human, and how I respond to my own existence. What I have created, then, are four sections, each titled for the focus of the poems within them.

We have “Cirrus” to begin the section because these poems deal with the element of roaming, and of being suspended between various places and emotions. The Latin translation of the word is a cloud that resembles a curl, generally occurring in fair weather – these clouds, in the atmosphere, look like they are moving frequently, which is reminiscent of the poetry within this section. Included are poems like, “To Be Away,” a poem about traveling not only into a different country, but also through the mind of someone else, and being isolated, suspended from the social world happening around the speaker. Also included is “Song [of a Dream],” a poem about the roaming quality of a dream as well as the feeling of being lost within a landscape, particularly when that landscape attacks. These poems offer the initial sense of humanity; exploring the quality of being uneasy in one’s own skin and environment, and the initial exploration of the world around us. This ultimately leads us to various other places, and hence, leads the reader to three sections that follow, to pursue an element of definitiveness, or locus.

The second section, “Cumulus,” offers pause and rumination about the surrounding world, a shift from travel and roaming into the critical pause to find meaning in the world, while experiencing absence and what loss can mean. Cumulus clouds are often lumpy, and little action in the way of any precipitation comes from



these clouds; they sit, heaped, in the sky, much like the way these poems pause and ruminate in the surrounding atmosphere. Here, we have poems like “A Fire Smolders,” where the speaker suffers the absence of another, or “This swollen space contains everything,” where the speaker again feels absence within her own home. These poems offer the experience of loss, absence, and the idea that once one stops roaming, there is inevitable absence of what once was, absence of the human presence that once existed, and also there is a pause, a brief stasis, to capture the meaning of both the roaming and its cessation. These poems offer a glance at isolation even within one’s own home, or within the most intimate relationship; there is, of course, an element of instability to both people and place within these poems. Particularly, we can view the poem “Anne Frank Museum, 2002” as a poem dealing with the absence of identity, the pause of a life within its natural home, and the connection the speaker can make to the absence of another, and this absence pursues rumination for the quality and meaning of a human life. These poems pause and offer a cessation from the roaming in the first section.

The third section, “Nimbus,” focuses on the aspect of what it means to be female, and what it essentially means to be of a gender and how this relates to the experience of being human. “Nimbus,” then, signifies the element of holding something, retaining, even birthing, as a nimbus cloud will retain and release precipitation, the way a female retains her gender through her biological structure. The poems in this section come after rumination, with the complication of gender. This section shifts into a more definitive, assertive voice of the speaker, as the

speaker of each poem finds herself embedded in her gender, her relationships to others, and what motherhood means for the female. In this section, we find “Morning Falling,” a poem dealing with a speaker whose mother has fallen on the porch step; the speaker here is assertive, and offers to help the mother emotionally through planting fierce flowers for her. We also have “Balloons,” a poem about the possibility of a woman bearing children, and this poem focuses also on a definitive, assertive ending by the female speaker. These poems illustrate the transformation of my own identity, from one who was searching and ruminating, to finally beginning to grasp a sense of self through my gender and how this relates to the world and the people around me. We also have, in this section, “On Making Tea,” where the speaker of the poem notices the seemingly insignificant image of a spider hanging by a thread and connects this to the assertiveness of the final stanza, deciding how she feels for another person and asking him into her home. These poems offer transition to a more definitive speaker, and they illustrate the transformation from traveler to woman, leading inevitably into the final section, “Cumulonimbus.”

“Cumulonimbus” deals, finally, with satisfaction and completion.

Cumulonimbus clouds are nimbus clouds exaggerated and filled to their fullest potential and they also retain the most amount of precipitation; with cumulonimbus clouds, it is sure to rain, much like the poems in this section are sure of themselves and hold the most weight of a definitive voice. The speaker in these poems is placed purposefully, declares emotions and pursues relationships with assertiveness of a human rather than simply as a woman. Within this section are poems like “Evening,”

where the speaker decides to declare her emotional response to another person through image, and this is decisive and clear. In another, "Heat," we also have a declaration of love to another person, and connections to the natural world are made within these poems. In "Lilies," we have a very definitive voice from the speaker, who finally connects to the natural world in a positive way, declaring instead of tentatively asking as in the first sections. The collection ends on "A lull," a poem of contemplation of absence, although, again, with a more declarative voice, with connections made between image and people seamlessly, bringing all the elements of metaphor, image, relationships and even to a degree, gender, into a purposeful flow that weaves the elements of being human together within the poem and within the collection itself.

The creation of the poem is one what causes anguish, discipline, and the ability to pare down, reduce, utilize and not merely splay emotions onto a page. I have always struggled with the use of an image that I see in my own mind, and how to connect such an image to the emotion, to craft the image as a vehicle, instead of letting the emotion of the poem dictate and point squarely to each image as an easy symbol. In addition, I have always had trouble not merely telling a story in the form of a poem. I relate to poems that do tell us a story, that narrate a moment, although these poems achieve something more than tell us a story; they sing. The poetry of narrative voice tells us a story while presenting devices, such as imagery, metaphor, and even simile, while setting us in a place where we, as readers, can relate, and know immediately where we are. The poem serves to ground us as much as make us think.

Sharon Olds, for instance, in her poem "The Promise," sets us in the middle of a restaurant. Her first two lines read, "With the second drink, at the restaurant, / holding hands on the bare table" (3), and we immediately have basic information. We are in a restaurant, and the two people here, the poem's apparent subjects, are lovers. The poem continues in this fashion, with short line breaks, and we never leave the table. Olds tells us a significant amount in the middle of the poem, as they discuss not wanting the other to suffer in a painful, slow hypothetical death, and Olds writes, "What you do not want / is to lie in a hospital bed for a year / after a stroke" (3). Olds uses conversational language to tell us what the promise signifies, and she tells us, "I tell you you do not / know me if you think I will not / kill you" (3). Here, we are being given basic information, and the build up to the language of the poem, the ending, is the idea that Olds is telling us an interesting story between a couple, narrating with an ambiguous and intimate "you" throughout. I can relate to this technique, and I begin to really learn her craft of the poem at its end, with the metaphor, the image, and the connections she makes easily with the help of the language, as she writes:

you know me for the bright, blood –  
 flecked delivery room, if a lion  
 had you in its jaws I would attack it, if the ropes  
 binding your soul are your own wrists, I will cut them (3-4).

The poem ends here, and for years, I have referred to it for help. I could always tell the story, place us somewhere in time, in a certain space, a situation. But

the ending of the poem works because of the imagery she presents, the intimacy between the two achieved through the delivery room, speckled with blood, the sheer force of the ending, the cutting of her own lover's wrists. The narrative is in the "I," the metaphoric and theoretical lion, and this all merges together in four lines to combine the meaning of the title to the eventual ending of the poem. She tells a story, and she gives us meaning, and deepens the emotional and real intimacy shared between the narrator and the "you" in the piece.

Poet Rainer Maria Rilke has also shed some light on this very topic for me, as seen in one of his letters, "Things aren't all so tangible and sayable as people would actually have us believe" (4). I believe this, particularly because of poetry like Olds', where she is saying something with the complexity of a poem, and not writing it clearly and plainly in a note to the reader. The craft of poetry allows us to say what we mean to, express what we see and feel, and this is innately difficult, because, as Rilke points out, in describing some things, particularly profound realizations, conversation just will not do. We need to make connections, fit pieces of imagery and symbol together, and have them lift each other off the page to create meaning. In my study of poetry, it has been effort to heed the advice I had been given: trust the reader. I do trust my reader, although with the pivotal meanings I wanted the reader to have, I have found myself *telling* the meanings, saying them in an un-crafted way. Now, in my thesis, I have found ways to use the language, to mold the connections, to allow the reader to draw necessary connections.

When working with poet and professor of English at SUNY Geneseo, Dave Kelly, I was crafting “Morning Falling,” and Kelly told me that it was fine to tell us a story about my mother, but for what purpose? He would ask me this through each draft, until finally, I created an image that created meaning, feeling, that I finally felt the language he was describing. I tell in the poem, for instance, “I guess I don’t think about families / all that often” (44), but Kelly pushed me to think further – what does this mean, why are you telling us? I was forced to find meaning, and justify the purpose of the poem. This is a critical element to a good poem. In the poem, we can see that I have added:

I felt violins ripping through me  
the way her voice tugged telling me  
over the phone  
bleak, with a narrow, aging throat  
that she had fallen (44).

The feeling of violins ripping – it had been what I was trying to say in each draft, and by merging image with local, more narrative language, I could connect the two to achieve the awful feeling of my mother phoning to admit she had fallen on the porch step. As Rilke substantiates, “mental creation too arises from the physical” (38), and this physical world must, for me, be combined with particular language for the meaning of the poem to be achieved.

Poet Mary Oliver understands this concept, this collision of language with image, as she writes, “Language is rich, and malleable. It is a living, vibrant material,

and every part of a poem works in conjunction with every other part – the content, the pace, the diction, the rhythm, the tone – as well as the very sliding, floating, thumping, rapping sound of it” (34). Language certainly is made to achieve all of these elements, and because of this, I have chosen the craft of poetry to write for my thesis. A poem does slide, both in sound and in rhythm, in narration and in content; each variable within a poem is dependent upon the other. The poem can work in a circle, and I tend to think the images in the poem develop and serve to build to the meaning of the poem, which, in the majority of the poems in my thesis, comes toward or at the end. Each part, each word, line break, stanza and image is working for the collective whole, although the collectivism seems to wrap itself around the inevitable ending of a poem. For instance, in my poem, “Girl A Trois,” the three stanzas serve to support each other, and each image represents isolation, a feeling of being alone, an unwillingness to admit to the isolation, and this builds to the end of the poem. The final image at the close of the poem, water from a rainstorm on the girl’s arm, and its final spinning, signify the conglomeration of the girl’s life, the sense of overwhelming isolation from each pocket of her life, that she cannot fully control, “She lets the heavy beads of rain swivel onto her arms and course / down slowly, each one spinning as it drops” (54). The final image rests on the support of each prior image, and the diction of the poem, the cold tone, and the short stanzas, strive to achieve the depiction of loneliness that the reader feels at the final line.

Poetry opened up for me in terms of getting beyond the mere telling aspect of it, when poet and professor at SUNY Brockport, Ralph Black, said in a poetry

workshop, “Lie. You can lie in a poem, you should, even, sometimes lie in a poem, it is a necessity.” I was relieved. I want, in my poetry, to achieve a balance of contemplation and image, of the image causing the reader to delve into him or herself, to think differently, to remember meaning where meaning previously was vacant. I want always to present the images and the events as they happened, although the poem is a piece of artwork, not a diary. The poem derives meaning, creates honest reaction, depicts emotion and makes connections; the poem achieves an instant. It is a moment. This is what I pursue – that instant, and the dawning of meaning from it. As Oliver comments, “The poem is not a discussion, not a lecture, but an *instance* – an instance of attention, of noticing something in the world” (74). This is what poetry means for me as a poet. Poetry calls for the noticing of details and the representation of details coupled with the achievement of the moment, the breath, and the stalling of emotion. When I was told I could lie, this did not mean for me to create worlds I had not been to, nor did it cause me to vastly change my poetry. What this advice did for me was to allow liberty with image. I was able to connect things in life that were not previously connected, like a flower to my mother, or an added hibiscus to a poem that was never there, but that added to the image and the rhythm to the poem, rather than a rose would. Things like this achieved rhythm that was somehow a bit less daunting when I could create image to meld with the reality I had actually experienced.

In Jane Mead’s poem, “La Guardia, the Story,” Mead addresses questions of her own veracity and accuracy as she depicts the story of a boy waiting for someone in the airport, with an iris in his hand. The poem has served as a form of guidance for



me, as Mead allows us to really utilize the language of the poem to create a tone of contemplation, while the imagery is telling, and the base questions she asks in the poem itself seem appropriate and necessary as she juxtaposes images she remembers of her own paired with watching the boy wait for someone and making up who that someone is, and when she arrives. Mead's ability to juxtapose the real and the imaginary is seen even within a stanza, as this hypothetical "she" the boy is waiting for is described:

She must have sat at the back of the plane –  
 a seven-forty-seven, she's been smoking.  
 Perhaps something has happened that matters.  
 Perhaps what has happened is nothing –  
 but the face that arrives is never  
 the face that left us. Remember that (431).

Mead utilizes the "perhaps" to attribute to the theoretical situations she poses, admitting she does not know the truth, although this "perhaps" makes all the difference. It allows the reader to open into the wealth of possibility, and it also allows Mead herself to take chances with her poem. She can go in many directions now, because of this "perhaps" and she can also deviate from telling only what she knows. It is here, in the realm of the possible but not definite, where she finds meaning, in that the face that left will not be the same as the one returning; here is her meaning. What Mead does from here is remarkable, focusing on the potential, the possible, juxtaposed with the factual:

In the frame story she walks off last,  
 sees the flower – hands up for a moment  
 for *surprise* before she takes it.  
 She gives him a small kiss and they head off  
 arm in arm in the direction marked “Baggage”  
 and “Ground Transportation,” down the long hall  
 happily, until I can no longer see them.

This is the story as I saw it happen.  
 The story as I told it.

In their second story he waits with the iris  
 long after she doesn’t arrive – ...

This is the story  
 as I imagine it – the story that exists.

Is there any other possible story? (432)

Here, Mead acknowledges that she is depicting both the real and the imaginary, and this admission has always been helpful to me, in terms of really being able to spy into her thought process within the presentation of details of this poem. What has helped me tremendously, however, is the idea to place both the hypothetical

and the real in the same poem; this serves to admit free association at times for me within my images presented in my poems, as well as the very liberating idea that I am not tied to the concrete nonfictional details that I can, with certainty, claim actually happened.

For instance, in my poem, "A Fire Smolders," I rely heavily on images that I am not sure ever actually happened, but they are images that work intricately with the language and the soft tone, and images that create meaning out of the fire smoldering on the edge of the property I had on the lake. In the last stanza, I write:

A garter snake crawls beneath the garden's  
green vines, over the flat, smooth stones  
you found in the creek. The path  
of your feet is evident in the dirt, as if  
you plucked a berry for the ride, held  
it tenuously in your two long fingers (34).

I did not see the snake, the footprints, nor did I have strawberries in my garden, though I did have a garden with flat, smooth stones, and often, the dirt that summer would be dry enough for me to see footprints. I remember writing this poem with the idea that the images should speak for themselves, and that the image of the snake seemed right, and upheld the rhythm of the free verse and the three stanzas I was trying to achieve. In addition, I was trying to create the sense of the person leaving, the tug of absence with the sighting of a footprint in the dirt, and I, too, used the hypothetical with "as if you plucked" (34) because I wanted the sense of the

narrator feeling the same as the reader, in that both think this could have happened, but no one can know with any amount of certainty. I close the poem with:

The embers of the fire  
glow like a city pulsating. Water lilies grow  
slowly on the banks of the lake, and  
boaters navigate in the dark” (34).

I have always thought that a fire smoldering looks like a city pulsating, and the poem was actually based loosely on this image, yet what I wanted to achieve was the sense of not knowing what to do when someone very important leaves one’s life suddenly, and with minimal evidence of the absence. This therefore led to boaters navigating in the dark, and supports both the hypothetical option of the poem: were there actually boaters? I can never say for sure, but the navigation in the dark achieved what I wanted to achieve as an image, which is the idea of being forced to move forward with absolutely no way to know where to go next, your life suddenly encapsulated and veiled in a thick, black blindness.

The technical aspect of writing a poem, the line breaks, the rhythm of the free verse, compels me to study the work of poets who really use the line break intelligently. That is, I am intrigued by where a line ends, when we move to a new stanza, and so forth within a poem. The line break is crucial to the understanding of a poem, and it structures the rhythm of a poem. I have poems in my collection with very short lines, and many of my poems have short stanzas to break up each idea. This helps clarify each image, and contextualize what each line within each stanza

stands for and means to the general and overall meaning of the poem. Oliver comments that, “the poem needs to be reliable. I cannot say too many times how powerful the techniques of line length and line breaks are” (56). The poem does need to be reliable, and therefore the line breaks must be consistent for not only the sake of the poem’s rhythm but also for the sake of the poem’s structure, meaning and context. A switch in the line breaks, perhaps from two words per line to suddenly a full line of text, will signify to the reader a dynamic shift not only in rhythm but also in the meaning of the poem; a sudden difference within a poem’s line breaks will create an urgent sense of understanding why this shift occurs and what the motivation for the difference can be.

I particularly admire the control a poet has over each line in a poem, and the ability to break a line appropriately. E. E. Cummings, for example, maintains severe control over his lines and where he breaks his lines, and this, I feel, enriches the poem considerably. In his poem that begins, “somewhere i have never traveled,gladly beyond,” Cummings breaks each line such that it has meaning and feels complete, and also enhances the line before it and after it within each stanza. Each line is strong on the page as it is, and is meaningful:

somewhere i have never traveled,gladly beyond

any experience,your eyes have their silence:

in your most frail gesture are things which enclose me,

or which i cannot touch because they are too near

your slightest look will easily unclothe me  
 though i have closed myself as fingers,  
 you open always petal by petal as Spring opens  
 (touching skillfully,mysteriously)her first rose (65).

Here, in the first two stanzas of the poem, Cummings has established the subject of the poem as well as the emotions he is conjuring through image, and yet each line can figuratively stand on its own. For instance, the first two lines run together, although “somewhere I have never traveled,gladly beyond” has meaning as an independent line; there is a willingness of the narrator of the poem to travel beyond a place he knows. In addition, each line functions for a specific emotion, such as, “your slightest look will easily unclothe me,” which is meaningful as a line, and also serves to enhance and widen the scope of the poem and its overall meaning. Each line break feels purposeful in Cummings’ poems, particularly the poems about emotion and relationships.

Within my own writing, I have attempted to use line breaks and lines themselves as critical elements of the poem. I use enjambment quite often to create a certain rhythm, a flowing sense of the moment, a fluidity to the poem. In “Evening,” I use short lines in order for the reader to move through the poem without stalling, and the lines flow into one another, if only subtly in this poem. For instance, the beginning of the poem exhibits the enjambment and set the short lines as a structure for the poem:

A ribbon of night

traces the kitchen, and fringes  
 of moon attach to the dishes  
 in the sink. A baby sits  
 near the windows. His eyes  
 wade like two adjoining lakes (56).

Some of the lines could stand alone, such as “A ribbon of night,” although I have placed the verb for the noun in the line underneath its object, thereby creating enjambment that causes us to read the poem from line to line as a fluid experience. I wanted the subject and verb to be separated so as they can rely upon each other within separate lines. For example, line five ends without completion, with “His eyes” as the end of the line, and then we must drop to “wade” immediately beginning line six to achieve a completion of the thought, to give meaning and action to the eyes. This is purposeful and can illustrate how I develop lines of a poem. I try to make a line strong enough that it can be its own thought, or image, and I also want, in poems like “Evening,” for the fluidity to be natural and easy for the reader. Therefore, enjambment seems appropriate. That said, even in “Evening,” I do hope to have lines that are complete on their own, such as “Potatoes brown in the oven,” where the entire construction of the line is completed without any enjambment necessary. These moments, too, are important for the poem, because I do want the poem, in specific places, to ruminate and pause, and I also think it is crucial for the reader to pause and think, and not to flow too fast through the poem.

Finally, we come to the non-traditional poetry within both the genre and my thesis. Experimental poetry can include, but is not limited to, the delineation of lines and line breaks, variations of stanzas, involving lines moving in various directions on the page, and the function of language shifts within experimental poetry. Within my thesis, I have a poem that moves backwards through actual line breaks, titled "Heat," in which the verb precedes the subject to accelerate the movement of the poem. It begins with this pacing, "found mystery / I / in the depth / dark / of the stare" (61), and consistently follows this accelerated and experimental style. I have chosen to include the poem not only because it takes risks with the delineation of subject-verb formation, but also because it expresses, through such pacing and form, the quickness with which a heart beats when impassioned and when declaring love for another person. This poem challenged me to focus on the moment of a relationship, that one sure feeling of attraction which races through one's entire body, or the force of the desire one can have in a singular memory or moment. This poem also aided in my pursuit of the prose poem, which is, of course, an established style of poetry while at the same time a deviation from the traditional form of a poem. In addition, I have included "The Body," which is spatially arranged on the page to represent the feeling of absence or of not being whole or unified. The poem's lines are spread wide, with white space between each line, and the poem travels both across and down the page slowly to enhance the effect of disunity, looseness, that surrounds the feeling of starvation.



The prose poem offers a detailed description of an event, typically told in the form of narration. The prose poem can elucidate the narrator's feelings of the event being recreated or told to the reader, and this heightens and challenges the reader's conception of what a poem can achieve within the experience of reading it. For instance, the prose poem that was critically influential to me as a poet was Carolyn Forché's poem, "The Colonel," in which she describes in detail her visit to a colonel in El Salvador. It is a devastating poem, yet what struck me the most was the paragraph form of the poem itself, and the candid narration. The prose poem is intimate in its scope, and often lets the reader into the event more so than a traditional poem might. For instance, the beginning of "The Colonel" directly addresses the reader, resembling a paragraph of nonfiction, "What you have heard is true. I was in his house. His wife carried a tray of coffee and sugar. His daughter filed her nails, his son went out for the night" (16). The idea of the prose poem is to utilize metaphor and image while telling a story of sorts, or an event. Forché certainly illustrates her poetic craft when we are led to the end, when human ears spill out of a paper bag in the colonel's hands, "Some of the ears on the floor caught this scrap of his voice. Some of the ears on the floor were pressed to the ground" (16). The ears are a vehicle for Forché to metaphorically describe the inhumane quality of this colonel. What is also compelling is the line break in the prose poem; it is seemingly undecided by the poet; it is simply the end of the line. I do calculate, in my prose poetry, which word will be the last of each line, because, as a poet, I believe it does matter, although there is an

element of the narration of the event being paramount for the purpose of the prose poem.

Within my own thesis, I have included "Song [of a Dream] and "Elbow Deep" as obvious prose poems. "Song [of Dream]" does represent a narrated dream as intimately as I possibly could, and "Elbow Deep" describes in detail a man walking into a sexual situation between two other people. The prose poem works for this event, I believe, because I wanted to tell the story of this moment, the meaning behind him walking into two strangers being intimate. I, like Forche, incorporated metaphor and image into the prose to avoid the poem being a paragraph, such as, "His friend had been elbow deep for years, elbow deep in slow rolling jazz, the feel of self-pity, talks with himself in the mirror" (25). Here, the speaker is telling us something about the subject of the poem, although we can see him having talks to himself in the mirror. Toward the end, the meaning is derived, making the content seem to work toward the close, the deeper meaning of this event, "His friend's breath fell heavy on the floor. Those fingers were sticky. Those fingers were moving. Those fingers: his friend is elbow deep in them" (25). This is not simply telling a story anymore, and just as Forche utilizes the ears as a vehicle for a social and political statement, I am utilizing the elbow deep phrase and the hand that is elbow deep as a vehicle to describe the isolation and desolation of the subject, the boy's friend who walked in on the two. What the prose poem can achieve is an accelerated sense of scene and place, while creating meaning from a singular event in an engaging and different way.

A poem creates and recreates moments of life; the elemental qualities of being human are presented in poems throughout the tradition of the genre and throughout my thesis as well. My ultimate goal is to have the reader see, visualize, smell, touch, taste and *feel* what it means to be human in the events as they happen within the poetry, and within the relationships we have as humans to each other and to nature. John Ciardi describes this as, "What one must always comprehend of poetry is that it is an experience the reader must re-live. There is no other contemplation of the arts" (664). Yes. This is what it means to read a poem that is well crafted, thoughtful and purposeful, where each line breaks where it needs to in order to examine, illuminate and create a vivid moment in our lives. It is, of course, the re-living that makes the art of poetry so compelling as human beings; the idea of memory and the attribution of feelings, emotions, and reactions to the memory itself. The poem can elucidate, for us, what it means to be human. The moment works for a poem when it is given purpose and meaning, when the metaphors, sounds, stanzas, line breaks and images are all working together as a functioning unit of artwork. The poems of "Something Elemental" are not only the recreation of moments and the tying the moments to images within the scope of my own breathing life, but they are a full representation of how I see the world, how I understand images to connect to one another, and how I connect to these images. It is as much about language and the disciplined craft of writing the poem as it is about the drive to write the moment. Both are vital to the poem's ultimate purpose, and without this, the poems fall flat. When her students ask why their writing matters, Anne Lamott tells us what she says to them, "Because of

the spirit, I say. Because of the heart. Writing and reading decrease our sense of isolation. They deepen and widen and expand our sense of life" (237). Yes, I think, this is what reading and writing poetry has been about; it is the unification of human beings to what matters most in the world, and the meaning of a life written in stanzas and line breaks, metaphor and image, rhythm and narration. This is the sharing of a life through the human experience of crafted language, the moment when the lungs expand, collapse, and expand again, pushing and supporting the movements of the heart.

I.

Cirrus

## To Be Away

He was already drinking  
when I woke up in Paris.  
The light in the room  
sifted through, like soft,  
lemon scented flour.  
His eyes were dead  
and narrow. On the  
street, we walked  
with people between  
us, and I stayed  
four paces behind.  
Even here, his back  
was always to me  
and we were strangers.  
In Paris, artists paint  
pretty girls on the sidewalks,  
and not even one  
gave me a second glance.  
In Paris, men take afternoon  
naps, and every baby  
looks happy.

In the country  
of his mind, I would never  
speak the same  
language, could not  
roam into the twists  
of his brain, would never  
be even a tourist.  
In his country,  
I did not have  
a place to stay.

In Paris, at least,  
I had a small chance,  
a small *sil vous plait*  
to the waiter.  
On Rue 28, turning  
a corner, he stopped,  
heaved, one hand  
to his mouth. A cat  
slinked into an open

basement window.  
He faced me, wiping  
his face, and said –  
*I cannot save you.*  
*You will have to learn*  
*yourself.* In his country,  
there were dead end  
streets, whole highways  
that did not  
intersect.

In Paris,  
evening is the most  
baleful time, when  
shoe stores close, models  
walk home, the flash  
of the camera  
still in their corneas,  
and every  
blinking moment  
disorients.

## Lovely Wings

At four in the morning, the cat persistently claws  
the thin bedroom wall. She's after the shrill  
sound of birds stuck between the boards,  
nesting within inches of space. The bedroom  
is dark. I have been in the middle  
of the same dream again.

The cops are called from under the covers,  
but we both know it doesn't matter. The timing  
is off, the dial tone too loud, the hand  
nears and hovers above me.

When I hear his voice, terror pools  
around me, a slow, loose membrane  
of hate. I know him. His face  
is consistently vacant, handsome. He must  
know it's safe. No real police, no hassle,  
no deadbolt to maneuver.

The cat scratching reminds me of him, the cat  
whose head he once patted, who once  
slept on his side of the bed. When the birds  
shriek, I cannot take it. Through a hole the size  
of a nail, I think his eye glints toward me.  
I pry my cat from the wall.

I imagine his long fingers slicing  
these tidy inches of space. I imagine  
he splits the birds' lovely wings,  
plucking them feather by feather.



## Elbow Deep

He was elbow deep into her when his friend broke down the bedroom door, a loud thud from his two hundred seventy pound frame. What his friend noticed was the size of her breasts, the thin line of muscle elongating her abdomen, the way her toes were pointing downward, off the edge of the bed. What his friend noticed were her eyes, the wide blank look on her face, his own surprise and how he could not get out of this. The room was cold, and damp. It smelled of beer, a used condom, that stale stench of rubber. The girl made no attempt at covering up; she shifted her hips a bit and the mattress bounced underneath. His friend had been elbow deep for years, elbow deep in slow rolling jazz, the feel of self-pity, talks with himself in the mirror. Elbow deep in a certain kind of loneliness, the desolation of a stalling intellect, its dances on the end of his tongue. Now this. The role of voyeur, the viewer, the third party participant. The hand was removed, the fingers sticky, and red. There was no going back. There were no words spoken. His friend's breath fell heavy on the floor. Those fingers were sticky. Those fingers were moving. Those fingers: his friend is elbow deep in them.

Nicholas

In the early morning  
flaming mirror, his  
father tied his tie,  
stared at the striking resemblance  
between them,  
his dark face  
stuck in a heavy  
wooden frame.

Nicholas was running  
a border, his pockets  
bulging and torn, and  
slipping around a corner,  
his fingers touched down  
on the raw, molten earth.

His wick torched  
and tore  
up through,  
wax dripping yellow  
and charring. Night  
fell with dew  
and consciousness.  
Blue escaped  
the orange. Rain  
came in patches  
near Detroit.

He blazed  
down a mountain,  
slurped pale ale,  
took scotch on the rocks  
much later.  
In the evening,  
he swallowed fish  
whole, and doused  
the dirt in gasoline,  
snakes of heat writhing  
everywhere. He cupped  
the flame and let  
it burn, his face  
in pieces in the mirror.

The Earl of Lonsdale, London

The people playing darts are drunk  
and drawing stars and moons  
on the scoreboard, their fingertips dusted  
with chalk. A dart hits the large triangle  
marked 9. Someone's ring clinks  
against a glass. You cough. Rain casually spills  
down the windows. A man, slight and creamy, pulls  
at his dreadlocks. He leans in, places both hands  
on our table, smiles out the corner of his  
mouth. I can almost smell his breath, like apricots –

Rain moves in a small line down Portobello, toward  
the toy store with antique lions. The lights  
flicker, someone throws the last soaring  
bullseye in darkness. When the rain subsides  
we stand to leave. On the table  
next to us, lines of white fingerprints.  
I pull my index finger through them,  
making one sloppy line that catches  
in the puddle beneath a pint glass  
that someone has slammed down hard.  
Outside, worms writhe in halves on the pavement,  
and pigeons shake the water from their wings.

### Of a Painting Done for Someone

Red clouds yank and tumultuously pull  
color beyond the thick blue man  
in the foreground, shaded  
by these cumulous visions  
spitting vulgar memory onto  
a distant place.

A pier extends to the left,  
to that part of the world  
where water rusts  
and ebbs, putters inside someone's  
closing mouth.

At once the painting has gone  
behind the blue man's back.  
He cannot move his head,  
no pivotal movement  
to catch the rounded  
moon that beats methodically  
in the sky. Blood-  
orange colors jut  
as night approaches,  
almost smear  
from vapors on the boiling stove.

The landscape moves,  
the moment ends;  
the far red pulls a shadow of wind.

The blue man has eyes  
that shift and moan,  
eyes that cannot twist  
within the paint. He cannot see  
this changing sky,  
the bare force of the moon.

The end of the world,  
says a casual observer,  
pointing to the swerving painting.

The thick blue man  
crosses his arms,  
the fists pushing out of the paint. Blue  
drips on the wooden table,  
sloshes into half-empty mugs.

Prove it,  
he mouths in silence,  
the lips a startling black.

## The Body

The body      for her            is a challenge   her stomach pushes   against the shiny  
 mahogany bar            crowds of people        shove into her   she sets her breasts on  
 top of the varnish and wet rings        some half-wiped        where glasses sat        she  
 orders gin        and tonic        in forty two minutes she buys another        the liquid  
 fills and bloats   she doesn't notice   she looks at herself            in the bathroom  
                  mirror   before she leaves        smiles at all the people   watching her        and  
 the way she pulls her abdomen   to her spine            tight            the birch trees are  
 violent            in the wind    in the slanted and twisting rain   she makes it to her  
 bed    the metal iron    headboard thrashes when she tosses            her curly  
 hair   streaking her face        her fingers claw at it            plug into her eyes        she  
 heaves and races   to the bathroom   fills the bowl easily   white, brown and filmy  
 like overmilked cereal            waves of sickness            soak her up    for hours  
                  until the bitter acid   stops coursing   and she retreats    lies flat on her back  
 all dewy and caramel   pants through the            window        breathing wind  
 and she sits up   grabs at her flesh            considers        the lock on her door  
 brass and embedded in the small curved knob   and walks toward it

August 29<sup>th</sup>

They are almost done with the house  
down the lake. When I drive by this morning,  
the last slats of wood teeter, hang  
loosely from the roof. When the dawn hits one,  
it gleams in its sway. Today is the 29th  
of August. The tomatoes in the garden  
are stalling, colors creeping so slowly  
that the leaves are catching up.

In the bathroom, you splash water  
on your face, and your hands shake  
inside the towel. Humidity pumps oil  
into the pores of your skin.  
Your face is the color of pumpkins,  
the lines equally as stretched.

When I come home, a thick meat smell  
pervades. Water titters in two tall glasses,  
waves lapse and crash on the dock. Your left hand  
is covered in blood, and meat hangs  
off the silver spatula in clumps,  
your eyes a fiery cave.

Tonight, the sun catches  
the completion of the house. There is  
no sound. Just the redness, everywhere,  
crawling into rooms through tiny windows.  
Your eyes remain closed, your breath  
the smoothness of stone. Today  
is your first sober day in years,  
and I do not even notice.

Edinburgh, Scotland

In the dim light of this breakfast table,  
two loose eggs slide quickly  
on the plate between my hands, covering  
pink and yellow roses on the ceramic.  
A man across from me pours juice  
from a small glass pitcher. The pulp rises  
and the fireplace crackles. A baby cries  
from the kitchen, then giggles; bacon sizzles  
in a pan. The wide oak banister sways  
under the pressure of a woman's delicate hand  
as she carefully descends the stairs. This morning,  
the weather is damp, and leveled. Outside,  
a plump mother hangs her linens  
on the line. Men in overcoats stroll by,  
glancing at their newspapers. How lovely  
it must be to see the early lights pop on  
from behind long curtains, a girl  
in her nightgown combing her hair.  
The soft scent of butter  
rolls deliberately through the room; a cup  
and saucer collide,  
and the white linens sway.

## Song [of a Dream]

Twin brown peaks of a coyote's ears rise up beyond the pasture, and before them, purple heather and simple mounds of dirt. Small bursts of light magnify the earth, and a dozen sunflowers perk. You have been singing for hours, the vocal chords expanding and snapping, the throat a sore, raging red. The coyote approaches with a wasp above his back, and his teeth, for you, are bared. The wasp hovers blithely. This may be all that there is. The coyote's paw is as large as your face, and he hums a song you have written, the melody full of swings and loops. He clips your throat with his claws, the wasp swoops into your hair, leaves the tip of his sting in your scalp. You finger the mark, at least half an inch, the wasp falls and dies in the soil. The coyote's humming is loud, and almost naturally human. With his snout, he nudges the insect, and your vocal chords fall from the slit in your neck. With your fingers, you push the slimy muscles back, stuff them in, try your best to sing. It is all you can do. The coyote slinks away, into the dull orange light.



## II.

Cumulus

### A Fire Smolders

Finally, the bulging strawberries hang heavy  
on the vine, and water lilies grow carefully  
on the rim of the lake. A fire smolders  
and empty bottles shift and melt  
from the heat. Smoke lifts. A long line  
of trees adjusts to brilliant auburn, and  
the moon emerges in basic white.

Spiders crawl into the house to nest  
in shoes you have left behind, dragging  
thin strands of silk webbing over  
the cold linoleum. Your scent drapes  
over the faucet like a rag.

A garter snake crawls beneath the garden's  
green vines, over the flat, smooth stones  
you found in the creek. The path  
of your feet is evident in the dirt, as if  
you plucked a berry for the ride, held  
it tenuously in your two long fingers, staining  
the flesh a glorious red. The embers of the fire  
glow like a city pulsating. Water lilies grow  
slowly on the banks of the lake, and  
boaters navigate in the dark.

Anne Frank Museum, 2002

Imagine this. Her spine creaks when she walks, hunched,  
under the tilted ceiling. When the floorboards cry, she panics.  
Yellow stars float by in her dreams, as if each  
had a beating heart. As if, years later, the stars  
had faces and waited in line around the building,  
pulling money out of drenched denim pockets  
to see the space. The attic.

Is this what it comes down to? A snaking line,  
an admission fee, the small *no pictures please*  
in the far left window? The bricks on the street  
form circles and they are more than I can bear.

I want to lean into you, my face close to yours  
and say, Listen: is this where we come from,  
is this who we are? But instead, it comes out  
wrong, and all I have left is this: the way clocks tick  
synchronically, the afterscent of lilacs as we pass,  
the touch of your hand to my bare skin.  
How strange it feels to be human.

The birds here hover above our heads,  
and the canal moves in fine strokes of green.

But, for a second, I imagine her heels' indentations  
in the bent and sagging wood, the close beating  
of her own yellow heart. Her forehead pressed  
to the window, palms spread, her eyes watching  
as dew collapses the brightest petals in the park.

## Enough

Snow has been gathering  
on his back wooden stairs.  
The gash on his face  
has scabbed,  
and he holds a single cube  
of ice to the cheek.  
We peel ripe bananas at the table,  
bite around the brown spots.  
His voice cracks,  
the gash opens,  
I think I could suddenly love him.  
We listen to the consistency  
of traffic, and watch thick black tires  
rub tracks into the street.

In these dense cold days, he tore through me,  
coursing up and up,  
touching gentle delicate nerves  
until I could not take anymore.  
And then I collected  
what ash was mine  
and packed it down,  
gray and consequential.

Passing Through Pennsylvania, on Our Way Home

Itching my leg in the backseat  
driving 49 down the long asphalt strip,  
acoustic guitar in my ears.

The rain hits hardest  
on the front windshield,  
pounds rhythm like furious news.

There is a boy down below us  
swinging a bat  
on the nighttime field, tossing  
the ball to himself  
in the lightning.

As we pass, he runs  
after the long white trail  
in the dripping air, combining  
the light and his real,  
whirling fingers.

Snow Falling on a Saturday Afternoon in February

He pushes his right, sneakered foot on the brake  
reversing down the long  
sloped asphalt driveway

He always looks sideways at my mother, her hand coursing  
through her soft, white hair

she sighs, turns her head to the passenger window

her ritual afternoon answer

*yes, the garage is shut*

he forces a laugh

It starts to snow then

falling on the windshield

coated with my father's  
hot hot breath

the sky tangled pink

has lost some of its shine

and maybe

we're all losing something

## Baseball

In the dusk of my adulthood  
I think of my father's voice,  
the faint glint of silver eyeglasses  
in a bare and manic twilight.  
This, I know,  
is where he lived,  
his brain folding into itself,  
into deeper lagoons  
of space. I wish  
he would take his heart  
out for me, mold it skillfully  
into a round and breathless mass,  
toss it toward my face.  
Just one swing,  
my one last chance,  
to connect  
and send it flying.

Celery Green

On the shoreline, feathers  
of a dead seagull flutter up, then down.  
Tiny black spiders  
prowl its body; some must fall  
between the cracks  
of rounded pebbles.

My conscience is gaping and red,  
pooling and seeping  
into the carpet; it is the shape of your face –  
oval, jutting, angular. Reaching down to touch it,  
the wind grazes its surface and all  
the liquid shakes.

This autumn, everything will change, even  
the timbre of silence. I think I will see your face  
everywhere, and hear your voice  
in the hollows of oak.

Impatience is the option of space, that line  
of distance between us. But listen to this sound:  
the coming and going of breath, that simple  
full release. And then, in low  
whispers over the tall weeds  
in the yard, we will look again, look harder,  
and we will run toward one another,  
yes?



## Swollen Space Contains Everything

The plastic on the window  
breathes. A bitter scent  
of merlot festers,  
slowly  
staining the glass.  
His work clothes  
wrinkle in the drier.  
The tomatoes  
shift and rot,  
and slump against  
the windowsill.  
His running shoes rest  
on the kitchen wall,  
the dingy laces  
uneven. Splayed  
across the countertops  
are half-smoked cigarettes,  
a water bill, pictures  
taken from trains.  
These beer bottles  
must have his fingerprints  
all over them, must at the  
mouth smell like wheat  
toast, cheddar and  
mustard. There is  
a boot-shaped dent  
in the door he opened  
last, the handle perhaps  
the final thing  
he touched – that essential  
marking of despair, no one  
here to look further. Sunlight  
bangs on a penny.  
The merlot coagulates  
like crushed plums.  
The cat  
is walking  
through shards  
of broken glass.

the night wind came fierce

off the east side of the pavement, dogs' ears rang in backyard quiet, insects invaded  
garbage cans upturned on the driveways, beads of water rolled down the fronts of my  
shoes, paint eroded on the bruised, slanted fence, my footsteps a burden behind me

in the late, dull morning, I sat on the edge of the bed and the clouds were gathering,  
smothering and exiting all at once

### III.

Nimbus

## Morning Falling

Morning was pink today.

I didn't think about my mother  
when I awoke in my own house,  
but while I was shutting off my alarm  
she fell and scraped her right knee  
against the cement we have been calling  
a porch  
for fifteen years.

I tried my first gin and tonic  
on it, picked up the thick, ridged glass  
with a floating piece of lime,  
sipped  
and spat  
onto the hibiscus.

I guess I don't think about families  
all that often,  
the way they ripple through people,  
not even in this dew  
thin and almost clear,  
leaving marks on the windshields  
and drooping yellow roses  
in the back  
by the trash.

I felt violins ripping through me  
the way her voice tugged telling me  
over the phone,

bleak, with a narrow, aging throat,

that she had fallen.

If I could plant her own flowers for her,  
I would.  
Pink and fierce  
with solid white centers.

## Friendship as Paradox

I could not have expected this.

Her voice is strained, coated, and presses  
into me. I can picture her now, the phone  
between shoulder and ear over a boiling pot.  
Steam rises to the ceiling, spoons  
clanging in the closing drawer. The window  
is slowly fogging, and on the ledge,  
a green cactus in a clay pot,  
its leaves waxy and thick, and a picture, unframed  
and furling, of her father before he died.

She stammers between her teeth, and the whites  
of her eyes are shining. On her plate, a garnish  
of parsley, and the shrimp are pink and curled.  
Butter congeals underneath, and her voice is the  
striking of claws. I ask her to take a meat cleaver  
and flatten it over my chest,  
over that dry and crackling savannah.  
The muscles will not stretch, and certainly  
will not reach her – the organs bundle and sigh.

Into the phone, she laughs, and a blazing fire  
ignites. Her heat encloses me, fast, in a thin,  
skimmy layer; my skin will begin to slide off.  
I count the seconds between our words,  
and I hear the doorbell ringing. Heat encircles me.  
In a sudden static of silence,  
she does not retrieve my skin  
from the hot and crawling floor.

### Ginny's Mother

she sat in the back row of the theater,  
her veiny hands tugging  
at the silk scarf  
when it slid off her scalp,  
while she watched  
her daughter dance

she had no use  
for hospitals then,  
their sterile green tiles  
and patients dragging their feet  
from the bathroom to the bed

at intermission, Ginny would sit  
next to her mother in deep red velvet  
and perspire, and she would not  
look at her, would not give one  
sweaty feathertouch of the hands

the wooden floor blistered  
Ginny's feet, and she would  
rub them intensely, plucking  
splinters from her toes,  
watching each tiny prick  
of blood appear

## Storming

5:04 in the morning.  
She rises,  
sheets cold from lack of use.  
A mother finds the house  
empty, bloodless,  
the way her daughter  
was found.

The dog cautiously  
follows her to the kitchen.  
The milk needs to be thrown  
out; she cannot bear to do it.

All the pictures  
are dusty  
and when the storm comes,  
heavy, she is dusting,  
barely aware of the roar  
and the uprooting of trees

She worries that she'll  
be empty always  
and discovers the ease of missing,  
the way it slides and reforms  
and appears in the mirror,

sprawled over her dark eyebrows,  
divot in the cheek,  
thick bottom lip.  
The reflection of her face  
is pale, a ghost.

She looks  
just like  
her daughter.

## Balloons

Against the gray morning sky,  
 small children's faces slide,  
 compartmentalized, window  
 by greasy window,  
 in the mysterious vessel of a school bus.  
 A few look happy, erupting,  
 their faces messes of smile. Yes,  
 children. I've said it. Something  
 we've never discussed before.

When we pass the candy store,  
 I imagine liquefied chocolate, or  
 vanilla, or widening holes  
 in the centers of dark, caving  
 teeth. Roots collapsing, trembling,  
 the nerves shaking just under the gums.  
 I picture the pulling of baby teeth  
 that grow at odd, irregular angles, whisky  
 on the tongue to sooth incessant crying.

The clouds are black handfuls of fury;  
 they crackle and spark over our heads.  
 One is the shape of a curled foot, or  
 the indented shape of a fetus. I picture  
 toothy smiles, bubbles of spit,  
 the first words of an unwanted  
 child: *mom sun please*

In the coffee shop, I put a mitten  
 over my dry, bony hand;  
 a heavy rush of blood comes. I know  
 this instantly. It is an empty space  
 draining, the private tightening  
 of my own vacuity. Resolve courses  
 through me. I will take this space  
 and make something of it, fill it  
 with pockets of downy flesh.  
 I will blow air into yellow balloons  
 until they almost burst  
 and release them, one by one,  
 above the open possibility of a field.



Poem for My Mother

There is something like hope  
in my mother's eyes.  
The pupils are black, the rims  
set in white, and red. A carnival  
for those who have almost  
given up. In her hair, deep  
white streaks. When she kisses  
my father, her mouth is closed.  
She shuts every window  
before dusk to keep the night  
from seeping in. Her nightgown  
swishes in its thin yellow cotton,  
her toes curl into the carpet.  
I once thought of her as lilacs  
and topsoil, the split  
of a butterfly's wings. Now, she is  
a dull morning, a slight and unnoticeable  
rain. When she comes for dinner,  
she brings the broccoli, a giant green  
bulk in her hand. It seems to flower  
from her palm. She is a firm yeast  
rising, and the dots on her dress  
are white, and moving. Her hair,  
untamed, is up. On her shin,  
a thin blue bruise; she reaches down absently  
to touch it. She presses it gently.  
There is hope,  
almost, in her eyes.

## Last Scene

man leaps into bed [boxers hung loosely]  
woman ties her hair back [long] enters. It is silence but for the rain, the heavy  
penetrating rain that pokes through tiny holes in the screen window  
man sees her [bare] beckons  
his skin pulls against the black room in deep shades of peach  
[her thighs tremble]  
she comes, follows the sound of his voice, finger to his lips, traces the pattern  
of warm down  
evening climbs gently to dawn, a delicate balance between them  
his breath catches at the window [at the foot of the bed] and the  
sweet sweet sweat pours down between the sheets  
her hair unties itself [falls soft] she wraps a strand around her finger [lets it go]  
she advanced to the window, a soft fingerprint on her spine [cautious]  
she trembles, sighs, trembles again, leans to the window, cups her hands,  
catches the rain

### On Making Tea

Since three minutes after seven,  
I have been waiting  
for one sound. I have absently  
watched the nightly news.

A spider hung  
from the ceiling  
by a tight, invisible  
string, his legs  
dancing wildly  
above the lovely rush  
of steam.

This is my second  
evening drinking tea,  
my eighth week  
of knowing you. I think  
if you come tonight, your feet  
heavy on the front steps,  
a slice of bright lemon  
in your hand,  
I would ask you in.

## The Window

When you and I finally part,  
think of cheese squirming under the bread.  
Think of running barefoot on hot  
asphalt, your brother playing hockey  
on the lake in March, the crisp sound  
of the ice cracking.

When you and I finally part,  
think of the dresses you wore:  
the red ones, the plunging lines, your favorite  
high black boots. Think of the thick  
pink scar across your throat, your necklace  
a trace of silver in your memory.

When you and I finally part, there will  
not be firecrackers, but we will look  
at one another once more. It will be morning,  
before anyone else is awake, and you  
will spot a bluejay in the far left tree. Coffee will  
brew in the pot. You will spill bright white milk  
everywhere, and it will drip down  
the wooden butcher's block. You will try  
to stop it with your fingers, but  
it will stream right through.

When you and I finally part, I will not be sad.  
I will sling my belongings over my shoulder,  
gasping at their weight. I will step on a flower  
your mother planted, the bud squirming purple  
in the rubber spaces of my shoe. I will look up  
at the right front window, and you will be there,  
bits of tissue crumpled in your two small hands.

## Girl a Trois

### I.

Girl removes all the mirrors from the room. Dusk settles and leaves a ring of sweat: humidity and longing. The suction of the lycra pulls at her skin. She peels the tights off, pink and wet. Soaked. Girl walks into the dark kitchen, where there are messages scrawled on a white board for her. She notices the handwriting, senses the anger in the chopped O's and the undotted i's.

### II.

Girl sits at the kitchen table with four others. One pulls toast from the toaster, drops a bright yellow egg onto its crumbly surface. Girl tries not to scream. *You're never here*, they say. Girl spots her poem on top of the trash, Melted cheese on its corner, spreading to the last word. Girl slinks to her room, lights a candle, watches the flame. It is peach in the afternoon, smells like baking vanilla, and it flickers with the smallest touches of wind.

### III.

Girl pats her morning face, guides the fingertips over the path of the skin. She notices the way the thick heat of summer comes and falls on her shoulders. Girl listens to the violin in the open afternoons, lets the dust float through the living room when a draft runs through the windows. Even her plants are shaking. The storm comes in through the kitchen, trembling. She lets the heavy beads of rain swivel onto her arms and course down slowly, each one spinning as it drops.

#### IV.

#### Cumulonimbus

## Evening

A ribbon of night  
traces the kitchen, and fringes  
of moon attach to the dishes  
in the sink. A baby sits  
near the windows. His eyes  
wade like two adjoining lakes.  
You feed him  
with the tenderness  
of watching two ants  
dragging crumbs  
together over a burning sidewalk.  
Potatoes brown in the oven,  
and carrots emit a thick  
surrounding smell. On television,  
the voice of the commentator  
cracks – your face turns  
with a laugh in your throat. The baby  
rejoices in toys put in front  
of him. The satin night  
touches down  
on the countertops;  
the empty wine glasses  
gleam on the table.  
How different  
the light looks  
with you in it.

## Lilies

Thunder left the lilies strong.

Quickly the wind came, east,  
off the front porch,  
draped around the side of the house  
where the cat sleeps  
in the dirt of early afternoon.

All the flowers swayed,  
your face in every center.

Did I tell you I wrapped you in fisherman's line  
in my dream?

How ready I have been  
to unwrap you  
and how rough  
the line has been.



## Sex

This time, he is directly on top of her  
& banging his head into the black  
clanking metal headboard  
& she lifts a wet palm to his skin,  
wrinkled & dripping &  
he draws his lips off of her

they turn their faces from one another,  
his thick chest jarring back  
& forth, flesh crumpling, folding

at the end her yowls reach  
the vent in the corner of the ceiling  
& he grips her, laughing

in the morning  
sleet strikes diagonally  
& water beads on the nightstand  
only centimeters from the avocado –  
the flame from a yellow candle  
wavers from each of his small breaths

## Even Though You're from Jersey

Dear Samantha,  
Just thought I would write before  
I go to bed. It's great to speak with you  
on the phone. I feel lucky  
that you're so close to me,  
because sometimes, like today  
I miss my friends that aren't  
too close anymore.  
God, every time  
I drive home, I look at one tree  
just before my neighborhood.  
You know the one.  
On the left side, huge and  
unyielding, beautiful, just  
like you. I'm not sure that  
you'll read this. I imagine  
you are out with guests right now,  
a rum drink in your left hand.  
I imagine someone exciting  
is telling you a story, maybe  
about dolphins, something  
you would never tell to me.  
My mother wallpapered  
the hallway in orange this week, and  
has started sleeping downstairs again.  
I wake her every morning.  
I have to get some rest now,  
and get ready for work tomorrow.  
Sleep well.  
Love always,  
Joe.

Honey

I come home  
to you  
tight

a line close to me

to wrap, contort

all of these sour days

I come home  
to you  
gracious that  
you're alive

and I wrap  
this line  
around me  
so heavy  
is this line

If I had honey  
you'd stick  
and I would pull you out

you never knowing  
how rare  
you are

## Heat

found mystery / I / in the depth / dark / of the stare / you gave / in the kitchen / yellow  
/ days later / catch myself / I / in the gaze / on the sofa / alone / my thoughts of you /  
so / solitary / and fine / the way / you laugh / like it means something / and / call me /  
little one / so / tender / your skin / touching mine / so fast kissing you / pure / tripping  
/ white / hot / golden / days / fall together / when / you're here / love you / I / do

## Lives Led for Each Other

I am standing on the edge of an ocean at high tide,  
moving back from the waves that push across the beach.

My mother comes home from work and my father isn't there.  
She thinks about calling me, what this absence could mean.

I am the smell of whisky, its caustic touch,  
the deep amber color of its swish in a glass.

My mother waits patiently with the phone in her hand.  
My father walks in and does not say a word.

I am film in a camera thrown in a lake,  
I have washed up on someone's small plot of sand and grass.  
I am the images that swirl and mess.  
I am my mother's eyes, my father's hair.  
I am the realm of possibility.

In the kitchen, visiting, I will sit on a stool.  
In the kitchen, I will deliberate the seconds on a clock.  
I will rub my tongue on the backs of my teeth and my tongue  
will suck and swell. In the kitchen, I will look at them and say,

Look at me I swear to god I am grateful for every fucking thing.

## Moss

Beads of moisture balance briefly on the railing,  
these soft blue orbs,  
sunlight pricks through them, one by one.

I listen to the trees rattle each other.  
Next to me, my mother laughs.

Inevitable darkness tortures us.  
Her eyes are blue marbles rolling on a wooden floor.

Night covers us like moss, wraps itself around me,  
beads of dew clasped to my eyelids.

A lull

in morning traffic,  
rows of pine growing smoothly  
toward evening. A moth's wings  
touching the porch  
light. Immovable portals of darkness  
emanating from the house. A loose hair  
on my lip, the curious moss  
covering the cracked boulder  
in the yard. Reconfigurations of space;  
the surrounding absence. Yours.  
That word. Not mine.  
The slight  
shudder  
of revolt, the pensive lilt,  
the phone almost ringing.  
Your day, your night,  
your time. Constellations changing  
formation in the sky  
and that still disorientation. Tires  
turning on the driveway, a slight hope  
that you're home, that porch  
light on, that moth, that dense and  
quiet moss, the black holes of windows  
in the long gray house, unlit,  
that hair on my lip, the  
hesitation to call, that thick  
chaotic sky, that moth,  
your voice,  
those rows, those pines,  
that moth, your night,  
the burning of bright white wings.

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